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[A Medical Device for the Ages: Historical Notes on Admiral Stokes' Stretcher](#)

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By André B. Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery



Unlike “ambulance cots” and “transferring boards” that were commonly used by the Navy at the end of the nineteenth century, the Stokes was both stretcher and splint in one.

“In taking up the subject of the transport of disabled persons one is amazed at the enormous energy that has been expended in that direction, and is disappointed at the crudeness of the devices that have been

evolved.”

~[Rear Adm. Charles Francis Stokes](#)

Washington, D.C., 1927: At the American Medical Association Convention a hospital corpsman is demonstrating how the U.S. Navy uses a wire basket stretcher for transporting wounded and injured. Standing before him is a stocky gentleman of advanced age dressed in suit and tie taking special interest in the demonstration.

“And so this is currently in use by the Navy?”

“Yes, sir. This device is standard operating equipment for all of the U.S. military.”

A nearby medical officer recognizing the inquisitor greets him, “[Admiral Stokes](#), it is so nice to see you again!”

At that moment the corpsman discovers that he had just demonstrated a medical device to the inventor himself—[Dr. Charles Francis Stokes](#)!



The Stokes Stretcher could immobilize the injured parts, allow for the carrying of a patient with minimum direct handling of extremities and, according to its inventor, offer some “comfort and a sense of security.”

The Stokes Stretcher—also known as the wire basket stretcher—is arguably one of the oldest medical devices in continuous use by the military. First exhibited at the [St. Louis World's Fair](#) in 1904, it was conceived by the Navy physician [Stokes](#) (1863-1931) who in the Spanish-American War witnessed first-hand the difficulties of transporting wounded through a Navy ship's gauntlet of gangways, ladders and hatches.

Unlike “ambulance cots” and “transferring boards” that were commonly used by the Navy at the end of the nineteenth century, the [Stokes](#) was both stretcher and splint in one. It could immobilize the injured parts, allow for the carrying of a patient with minimum direct handling of extremities and, according to its inventor, offer some “comfort and a sense of security.”

In January 1906, by order of [President Theodore Roosevelt](#), a joint board of Army and Navy medical officers convened to look at “improving the [military] medical departments.” Along with the proposal for standardized diagnostic tags, and the use of a Hospital Corps pouch (forerunner of the unit bag), the medical officers called for adoption of the Stokes Stretcher by the Army and Navy for use aboard hospital ships, transports and at seacoast artillery stations.

[Charles Stokes](#) would go on to serve as the first medical officer to command a Navy hospital ship (USS *Relief*) sailing it around the globe with Roosevelt’s “[Great White Fleet](#)” in 1908. In 1910, Stokes was appointed the Navy’s fourteenth [surgeon general](#), holding the office until 1914. He retired from the Navy as a rear admiral in 1917.

Today, his namesake stretcher, still in use throughout the world, is a testament to the staying power of one Navy physician’s great ideas.

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